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### Anabaptists and Discipleship

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## Anabaptists and Discipleship

### Introduction

The Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century broke the monopoly of Western Roman Catholic Christianity and gave rise to a new form of Christianity called Protestantism. This new movement, from its very inception, was fragmented and divided. Among the Protestant reformers were the Radicals who were distinguished from magisterial reformers like Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. These individuals called the Radicals insisted that the corrupt medieval church was beyond reformation and had to be reconstituted after the model of the New Testament apostolic church. Their major concern was the renewal of the original Christianity of the apostles. They demanded a return to the primitive Christianity of the Early church and were unwilling to accept any compromise on this. It's no wonder they were called "Radicals."

One scholar regards this term as particularly appropriate in two ways. These Reformers were the "most radical in their break with the Catholic tradition and the most radical in their use of the biblical norms for the restoration of the church and the Christian life."<sup>1</sup> But their radicalism was more than biblicistic. This radicalism was based more on a "thorough going radical, valid criticism of the basic religious assumptions of their times.... It is not out of place for radical to carry some of the color the word has acquired in our contemporary culture- dangerous, revolutionary, destructive, irresponsible, undependable, immoral. For these very

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<sup>1</sup> Walter L Emmerson, *The Reformation and the Advent Movement*, (Washington D.C: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1983) 9,11; Cornelius Kran, *Dutch Anabaptism* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968) 252

words were used of the Anabaptists<sup>2</sup> in the sixteenth century by the representatives of the established orders in the church and the state, sometimes with some justification”.<sup>3</sup>

Many of these Radicals claimed that as Christians they could not participate in government, bear arms, pay taxes, and swear oaths. People in of that time saw these actions as undermining the very structure of society and for that reason they were regarded as seditious in many Protestant lands. These actions only confirmed in the minds of many their radicalism.

The Radicals were not a unified group. Scholars view that they emerged from three main sources. The first is the movement of Swiss origins, “strongly Biblicist and separatists in character”<sup>4</sup>. They were originally called the Brethren, but they would be identified primarily as the evangelical Anabaptists. The second was the Dutch/German movement, apocalyptic in nature. The third, the South German Austrian movement with a mystical and medieval character<sup>5</sup>. My discussion will focus primarily on the evangelical Anabaptists, who were closest to the magisterial reformers and their theology was the most biblio-centric and Christo-centric.

At the risk of oversimplification, the central concept for Luther was trust, and for Calvin it was obedience, but for the Evangelical Radicals it was discipleship. The Radicals agreed with the magisterial Reformers about justification by faith but they were not willing to stop there. Their concern was about what followed justification - character development, the ethical life,

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<sup>2</sup> Anabaptist or rebaptizer was one of the many names given to these radicals by their enemies, because of their refusal to accept infant baptism and their insistence that baptism should be given only to adult believers who have been converted and instructed. Anabaptist was considered a derogatory term by them, but over the years this name has stuck and has come to define the group in a unique way.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*. (Waterloo Ontario: Conrad Press 1973) 9, 10

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Liechty, *Sabbatarianism in the Sixteenth Century, A Page in the History of the Radical Reformation*. (Berrien Springs, MI : Andrews University Press 1995) 12

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 12

and where love predominates. They criticized bitterly contemporary Catholicism and Protestantism for their lack of emphasis on the regenerate life and love. Karlstadt, one of their leading theologian, while agreeing with Luther about God's grace, felt Luther had not gone far enough. He believed that God's grace not only justifies but "remakes and regenerates the sinner leading them to a subsequent life of discipleship and obedience. In Karlstadt's view, grace is efficacious and faith results in overcoming sin." <sup>6</sup>

### **Discipleship**

The Radicals emphasized above all else, discipleship. They found this mandate for discipleship in the Bible. Discipleship was the core value of the Anabaptist community, an idea which is closely connected to the concept of church, salvation, and suffering. For Anabaptists becoming a Christian means following the footsteps of Jesus (that is what a disciple is). This commitment and surrender to Jesus meant living a life like Jesus. This life entailed suffering, deprivation, and persecution. Discipleship is following in Christ's footsteps, "repent, be born from above, become as little children, not in understanding, but in malice, be of the same mind as Christ, walk as he did, deny ourselves, take up his cross and follow him"<sup>7</sup> This involves total renunciation, self-sacrifice, a dying to self and the world, a yielded state of being that is willing to accept God's will in all things, and embracing of the cross, even at the expense of all that one holds dear in life. The Anabaptist martyr Jörg Wagner expressed the radical Christian discipleship with this poem:

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<sup>6</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Abridged Student Edition* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press 1995) 22

<sup>7</sup> Walter Klaassen. ed. *Classics of the Radical Reformation- Anabaptism in Outline* (Waterloo Ontario: Herald Press 1981), 99

He who would follow Christ in life,  
must scorn the world's insult and strife,  
And bear his cross each day,  
for this alone leads to the throne;  
Christ is the only way,  
Christ's servants follow him to death  
and give their body life and breath  
On cross rock and pyre  
as gold is tried and purified,  
they stand the test of fire  
renouncing all; they choose the cross,  
And claiming it, count all as loss  
E'en home and child and wife.  
Forsaking gain, forgetting pain  
they enter into life.<sup>8</sup>

Balthazar Hubmaier the preeminent theologian of the movement, in an imaginary dialogue describes this suffering as the nearest way to eternal life “Leon: What is the nearest way by which one can go to eternal life? Hans: Through anguish, distress, suffering, persecution and death, for the sake of the name Christ Jesus. He himself had to suffer, and thus enter into his glory (Lk. 24) St. Paul also says: all who will live godly in Christ must endure persecution (2 Tim. 3)... Where Christ is and lives, he bears his cross upon his shoulders, and gives to each Christian his own little cross to bear, and with it to follow him. We should wait for the little cross, and when it comes receive it willingly, with joy and patience, and not choose our own chips and scraps of wood in imagined spirituality, and lay them on ourselves without divine understanding”<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Klaassen, ed. *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* ( Waterloo Ontario : Herald Press, 1981) 88 Jörg Wagner, “Wer Christo jetzt will folgen noch” (1527) in *Etliche schöne christliche Gesäng* (1564), translated by Klaassen, This was the earliest Anabaptist Hymnal later known as *Ausbund*

<sup>9</sup> Klaassen 87, 88

The heart of the Anabaptist spirituality was discipleship. For the Anabaptist, there can be no true follower without discipleship. Being a disciple involved a Christian life of self-denial. The Anabaptists believed that a person can forfeit its justification if he/she ceases to be a disciple. In fact, conversion was for the Anabaptists only the first part of the salvation process. Most Anabaptists believed that the conversion experience, besides offering a person assurance of pardon and forgiveness, also provides sufficient grace and power to perform good works and manifest various fruits of Christian life. This was because, for Anabaptists, Justification was not merely a forensic declaration but a *union* of individual with the Spirit of God. This spiritual union equipped the disciple to obtain conquering power over temptation and fill the disciple with love for God, his neighbor and his commandments.<sup>10</sup>

Their concept of discipleship centers around five important values: love, separation, suffering, non-resistance, and following the growing commission of making disciples of all men which expresses itself on strong evangelical fervor and mission outreach.

## **Love**

At the heart of discipleship for the Anabaptist was love. This was best illustrated by the community in Moravia where brotherly love was at the foundation of a society that practiced “a type of Christian communion. Goods and wealth were shared, after the pattern of the New Testament congregation at Jerusalem (Acts 4:32). After all if I love my neighbor as myself, how can I see him suffer for want of something which I have in abundance?”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Malcom Yarnell (ed.), *The Anabaptists and Contemporary Baptists; Restoring New Testament Christianity*, Essays in Honor of Paige Patterson, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2013), 163-166.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 63.

In Hans Deck's work, *Concerning True Love*, he defines love as spiritual power by which one is united with another person. He further describes it as a willingness to deprive oneself of everything or willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of the beloved. He describes this love as showing no favorites. Humanity does not possess the capacity to comprehend this love if God did not make it possible to be demonstrated through particular people. Hans calls these people "holy and children of God". He describes this love as more "readily understood when it is most perfectly shown. The more perfect this love is comprehended, the more attractive it becomes. Salvation is nearest to those most attracted by this love."<sup>12</sup>

## **Separation**

The separation motif was a common feature of the Anabaptist life. They saw the world as degenerate, sinful and controlled by the devil. They felt that their only choice was to separate themselves from the state and all of its activities. As they experienced greater and greater persecution, separation became even more necessary for survival. Conrad Grebel, one of the early followers of Ulrich Zwingli urged his fellow reformers to avoid using the sword and the practice of usury.<sup>13</sup> Grebel and other Anabaptists firmly denied the use of force to preach

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<sup>12</sup> Denis R. Janz. ed. *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts and Introductions 2<sup>nd</sup>. edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) 215, 216

<sup>13</sup> Conrad Grebel's letter to Thomas Munster, Zurich, September 5, 1524 (Original: Stadtbibliothek St. Gallen, VB.XI.97), in Lelan Harder, *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism: The Grebel Letters and Related Documents*, (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), 293; See also Jehchoon You, "The 'Separation from the World' Motif in Early Swiss Anabaptism and Early Seventh-day Adventism," (MA Dissertation, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2012), 22.

the gospel. Zwingli rejected Anabaptist's attitudes toward government and criticized their attempts to have a separate church calling it "separatism, sectarianism."<sup>14</sup>

Anabaptists saw the kingdom of Christ (The Church) as characterized by peace, forgiveness, nonviolence and patience. The kingdom of the world or Satan was strife, vengeance, anger and the sword that kills. Although the civil government belonged to the kingdom of the world, the Anabaptists acknowledged that governments were allowed to rule by God and should be obeyed. However, Anabaptists believed that a true Christian should not participate in government because a servant of Christ had no liberty to use coercion and vengeance or to kill – as that contrary to the commandments of Christ. Most Anabaptists therefore rejected all participation in politics for the reasons mentioned above, and also because any Anabaptist in government in sixteenth-century Europe would soon find himself prosecuting the members of his own church

### **Non-resistance**

Closely related to the idea of separation from the world and the state is the idea of pacifism and non-resistance. Although some radical reformers advocated violence and revolution, the vast majority of Anabaptists were pacifists. Michael Sattler wrote (1527): "the sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ."<sup>15</sup> For Sattler, only secular rulers should use the sword. The believer's weapon of punishment was not a sword but the use of the

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<sup>14</sup> Conrad Grebel, "The Second Public Disputation on Baptism, Zurich, March, 20-22, 1525" in Harder, *the Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 355. See also Jechoon You, "The 'Separation from the World' Motif in Early Swiss Anabaptism," 23.

<sup>15</sup> Klaassen, 268.



Ban, which was the removal of apostate members from the faith<sup>16</sup>. Hans Denck (1527) expressed the same view with these words: “no Christian, who wishes to boast in the Lord may use power to coerce and rule.”<sup>17</sup> Jacob Hutter (1535) wrote: “Rather than wrong any man of a single penny, we would suffer the loss of a hundred gulden; and sooner than strike our enemy with the hand, much less the spear, or sword, or halbert, as the world does,”<sup>18</sup> Menno Simons (1535) a leader of Dutch Anabaptists said it this way:

“All of you who fight with the sword of David, and also be the servants of the Lord, consider these words, which show how a servant should be minded. If he is not to strive, and quarrel, how then can he fight? If he is to be gentle to all men, how can he then hate and harm them? If he is to be ready to learn, how can he lay aside the apostolic weapons? He will need them, if he is to instruct in meekness those that oppose, how can he destroy them?”<sup>19</sup>

In another treatise, Simons wrote: “We teach and acknowledge no other sword, nor tumult in the kingdom of church of Christ than the sharp sword of the Spirit, God’s Word . . . . But the civil sword we leave to those to whom it is committed. Let everyone be careful lest he transgress in the matter of the sword, lest he perish with the sword. Mt. 26:52.”<sup>20</sup> Peter Reideman said: “now if vengeance is God’s and not ours, it ought to be left to him and not

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid 268

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 270.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 275.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 275

<sup>20</sup> J.C. Wenger ed. Menno Simmons, “Foundation of Christian Doctrine” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simmons* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 200.

practiced or exercised by ourselves.”<sup>21</sup> These Anabaptist leaders taught that all acts of revenge and vengeance must be left to God.

Balthazar Hubmaier, differed from his Anabaptist colleagues and accepted the use of the sword as justifiable. While he was against the use of the sword in a holy war [religious war], it could be used in defense of a just war and the preservation of order. Hubmaier did not go as far as his Protestant and Catholic contemporaries in advocating the necessity of war for the gospel. He argued that it be used wisely: “Yet I implore, admonish and warn, in the name of Jesus Christ and of his last judgment, all those whom God has girded with the sword, not to use it against innocent blood with persecution, imprisonment, hanging, drowning, or burning. Verily, verily, I say to them that he shed and martyred blood will cry out against them to heaven with the innocent blood of pious Abel against the Cainites, murderers and shedders of blood, to God. God will demand it at their hands, and pour out his vengeance on them and on their children.”<sup>22</sup>

## **Suffering**

The theme of suffering is closely related to non-resistance and love as another important point of emphasis the understanding of discipleship by the Radicals. The disciple is on who is willing to suffer in the spirit of cross-bearing. The church is made up of such disciples is a suffering church, it bears the cross along with its lord and is willing to be martyred. No other

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<sup>21</sup> Klaassen, 277-280.

<sup>22</sup> Klaassen, 246.

group of the period was more willing to die for their faith and pay the ultimate cost of discipleship as the Radicals.<sup>23</sup> The radicals saw a divine purpose in suffering. It was “not accidental or haphazard but part of a movement of history by which God will eventually be victorious. The cross with its humiliation. Obedience, patience and forgiveness stretches from one point of history both backward—all the elect suffered from the beginning of the world and forward. It is one great liberating movement of God”<sup>24</sup> Hans Hut asserts that if a man is to come to the knowledge of the living son of God he must await the work of God through the cross of Christ which we must carry and follow in the footsteps of Christ. At those places Christ shows us the seriousness and righteousness of God the Father which he Father exercises through Christ. and all who desire to grow in the body of Christ in which the son of God is known and through which we become Gods’ children and joint heirs with Christ. must also suffer with him.<sup>25</sup>

There are two kinds of suffering, the internal suffering caused by the slow liberation from the dependence on material things, this kind of suffering not only liberates from sin but also destroys sin. There is also an external suffering of persecution understood as part of the cross of Christ, we are not doing this for Christ, but sharing something with him. The disciple shares in the cross as a co-sacrifice.<sup>26</sup> In the world of the Radicals both kinds of sufferings were necessary for the believer.

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<sup>23</sup> Klaassen 85

<sup>24</sup> Klassen 86

<sup>25</sup> Klaassen 89

<sup>26</sup> ibid 86

## Evangelistic Fervor

The Radicals view obedience to the Great Commission as essential to true discipleship. When Jesus gave the command to make disciples, these Radical took this command very seriously. So, the Anabaptists in persecution or in time of peace were tireless and effective evangelists. Their leaders were active even aggressive in the propagation of the new view. Their evangelization took place in the midst of their daily activities. The first to be evangelized were those in their friendship and kinship circles. They used their workplace as an informal bible school. Crafts such as weaving and spinning which were carried out in large common rooms with groups of people present, provided good opportunities to share their message. Many of these radicals used their profession as a cover to carry out their evangelistic work. Many others were travelling salesmen and merchants and while selling their goods they took the opportunity to share with people their message. An example of this was Hans Hut who was a travelling book salesman who was on the road constantly and many opportunities to converse with people<sup>27</sup>.

Women played an important part in spreading their message and consolidating the faith of fellow believers. The Anabaptist women for example from "Augsburg were the mainstay of the underground church. They hosted meetings and subversive sewing circles, provided a communication network, evangelized among their peers, housed and fed refugees and travelling Anabaptists, provided support for families in prison"<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Snyder, 90, 91

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 95

What is noteworthy about the evangelism of the Radicals is that this was very dangerous work, because it was strictly prohibited by the authorities. None of the other reformers were engaging in this kind of evangelism in at this time. They did this work at great risk to themselves whether they were in Protestant or Catholic lands. Many of them suffered martyrdom, paying the ultimate price with her lives.

#### Conclusion.

This brief survey reveals that at the heart of the Radicals' theology and practice was discipleship. What is important to note is that discipleship was not simply a theological concept, but a practical, ethical and lived experience. The Radicals went beyond the magisterial reformers who focused primarily on theological reformation. They preached and pursued a reformation that transformed every dimension of their lives. They recognized that correct theology did not necessarily lead to morally upright lives. In fact, practicing the virtues of brotherly love, experiencing suffering and persecution, modeling pacifism, sharing the good news of the gospel with one's neighbor were more potent tools in carrying out the reformation and in persuading unbelievers to the cause of Christ. For the Radicals, the doctrine of Justification, which was the central issue of the reformers was not just a beautiful sounding doctrine that focused only on forgiveness, only had real meaning when it led to the transformation of lives. Justification was just the beginning of the journey, discipleship was the real journey.